

Combatting Illiteracy for Sustainable Development



The history of Eritrean education could be divided into three major periods: colonial education, education during the revolution (armed struggle) and education after independence.

Pre-independence Scenario—Simultaneous fight against illiteracy and the enemy

Its fighting with the illiteracy thus began in the war camps against its invader way back in 1970s.

“...even during the smaller battles....classes continued, with fighters taking turns in fighting and studying,” reported Frits Eisenloeffe, a Dutch journalist way back in 1990s.

Though “difficulties included the small number of teachers qualified to teach higher level students and transition from learning in Amharic, (the Ethiopian language imposed on Eritrean schools), to learning in Tigrigna, (the predominant mother tongue of majority Eritreans)”, as documented by Les Gottesman in his famous research work ‘To fight and learn’, the leadership and the people of Eritrea surged forward in an indefatigable concerted exercise.

James Firebrace and Stuart Holland in their book, ‘Never Kneel Down Drought, Development, and Liberation in Eritrea’ eulogized the revolutionary methods adopted by the EPLF way back in 1970s in combating with the both enemies simultaneously. What began as literacy campaigns by the EPLF soon took the shape of countrywide schooling and gave birth to Zero school.

The first educational goal-to make each fighter literate-was achieved by 1972 observed Firebrace and Holland. They went on describing further, that “....all the new recruits with less than seven years (of) schooling complet (ing) their education within the EPLF....(W)e often saw fighters sitting in the shade of trees studying. In this respect the Eritrean People’s Liberation Army differs from almost every other Third World army. For the EPLF, high levels of literacy and education among the fighters ensure a more effective fighting force, because fighters are highly motivated combatants, not just passive recipients of orders. We were surprised by how well informed and interested many

fighters were about world affairs....”

Country-wide Schooling and the Zero School

As the civil war came to an end in 1974 the EPLF began planning for educational programs and services for the liberated areas, a strategy perhaps no freedom struggle elsewhere in the world had thus far conceived as an integral part of its fight with its enemy. The efforts of EPLF thus culminated in the evolution of first ever Zero school in Sahel Province.

“The Zero School” is a revolutionary step in the pre-independence literacy campaign, in that it did so many experiments, including curriculum planning and designing, each of which needs to be evaluated in terms of its efficacy as low cost educational technologies and planning from the point of modern day strategies.

Les Gottesman writes about Zero school, “...it started with about 150 students and not more than ten teachers. The situation was very difficult; imagine what you can do with ten or less than ten teachers, and inexperienced teachers. There was no curriculum, there were no school supplies, there was no school experience. But they did a miracle. They sketched the elementary curriculum and started the education, or the teaching process, for the first time in Eritrean languages, Tigray and Tigrigna, since the federation administration....”

The Zero School “was designed as a teaching laboratory” writes Pateman in his most popular book, “Eritrea: Even the Stones Are Burning”. “It came to be the workshop for theexpanding national education system. The lessons of Zero were learned and relearned” reported Eritrean Relief Association, in its first ever document on Developing a National Education System for Eritrea: The Beginnings. The Zero school soon grew up in concept over a period of time and practice and rose to the level of offering 5 years elementary education and two years middle school, adding grades as students continued to pour in. By 1983, the strength of the school went up to 3000 students. School subjects like

Geography, History of Eritrea, Africa and the World, Science and Arithmetic, Tigrigna, Tigray, Arabic and English; arts, music, sports and handicrafts at the elementary level and technical education at the middle level. If the objectives of the Zero school were to end here, then it would not have place in the history of Eritrean freedom struggle for so long as now. Nor it could have been an instrument of emulation for other countries placed in similar situation either in Africa or elsewhere. But something more came out of this than expected.

It became a basis for the further expansion of education to the rural side especially during the national literacy campaigns between 1983-87, writes Pateman. This could be achieved by reintroducing the students who passed out of the Zero school to open similar schools on the countryside to enable the poor peasants to read and write. Thus prior to the Strategic withdrawal there were about 30,000 students attending over 150 schools, most of which were located on the country side serving the pastoralists and semi-pastoralists populations at four locations.

Women Emancipation

This apart, there was a major leap forward in the traditional life of Eritrea. It provided first ever opportunity for the women to attend the school and study. Probably no nation’s freedom struggle could be a success without the emancipation of women from traditional fetters and their willful participation. Where the women did not participate, learn and inspire further the freedom struggle, they ended up in either protracted battles or in sheer waterloos.

“One notable outcome of opening such schools was the unveiling and full participation of the women who had traditionally had no opportunity to go out of their huts. There is no doubt that these schools marked a historical point in the effort to emancipate women,” said the report of Eritrean Relief Association.

Though the country wide schooling came to a grinding halt in 1978 itself, the unique Zero School education

continued to flourish during 1980s in all most all the towns and in the refugee camps in Sudan wherever Ethiopian forces took to heels.

Vocational Education

The Educational programs during the freedom struggle assume significance from against the backdrop of its ability to combine vocational education with the academic learning. They were so designed that, in short, they met both the civil as well military needs. A revolutionary example to this, write James Firebrace and Stuart Holland, is the development of technology for the manufacture of sanitary napkins. This brought a sea change in the life style of Eritrean women. Another important facet of the vocational training given to the cadres during the liberation struggle was to reassemble the material recovered from the debris of the war, which proved a miracle and rendered the Eritrean People Liberation Army the most well equipped one among all African armies fighting for similar cause. For example, the spare parts of vehicles, cooking utensils, teaching materials, aids for the disabled and hospital equipment are developed from the captured debris of the war including tanks besides constructing a number of machines necessary for producing these items. This plan of action went on for every item ranging from shells to plough shares. The technicians were so trained that they could either replace or increase the output of their ammunition including enhancing the capacity of the tanks by following the technology found in the captured armory and tanks.

The First National Adult Literacy Campaign

Though the first National Adult Literacy Campaign on the ideological lines of the EPLF began in 1983 by sending around 451 Zero School students to serve as Teachers it did not last beyond 1985 for both the drought and Ethiopian offensive turned out major threats simultaneously. Nevertheless, the literacy campaign was a great success in that it reached indeed around 56,000 adults of whom 60% of them are women, writes Les Gottesman. During the campaign reading, writing, numeration, hygiene, sanitation and health were taught. There were rural training programs in Agriculture for rural communities too during this period. Though this campaign ended abruptly, in a subtle way the EPLF continued again since 1988 to offer the adult education programs for civil health and agriculture besides political workers. By 1990, the war for the freedom became intense and adult education programs focused only the war fighters.

The Educational Objectives-An EPLF perspective

During its 23 years of pre-independence struggle the EPLF has emerged with well-articulated and well-defined educational objectives. Two important most perhaps need a mention

here. i. The transmission of skills that can be used to solve practical problems, and ii. The creation of the well informed, literate populace such that democracy and freedom are not threatened by the emergence of an authoritarian or even tyrannical governments. Where as the first one led the country to self-reliance during the turbulent period of war, writes Les Gottesman, by achieving a “critical minimum” of skilled people in many areas and multiplying them through the crash training programs, the second one was not meant to the mere attainment of material values. It meant fostering mass participation in democratic process, rather asserted the document “Social Transformation in Eritrea V: Education as a Part of the Liberation Struggle-III” of the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front.

The whole perspective of that time was well depicted in a nutshell by Thomas Keneally, an Australian novelist who was in Eritrea that time.

The whole of Eritrea goes to school15 meters from the front trenches, as in far villages, you can see classes in progress. The Eritrean axiom is that a tyrant cannot arise if there is a universally literate and aware population. The day seems consumed by education.... In the afternoons the adults are taught.

It was a grand involvement of all the sections of the society, writes Pateman. All of the mass organizations i.e. those involving workers, peasants, women and youth took an active part in deciding the curriculum and organization of the Zero School. “Education is also part of our strategy of integrated development” thundered the EPLF in its Policy document Social transformation in Eritrea VI.

Post Independence—Efforts to grapple with the problem of illiteracy

Despite enormous efforts of EPLF prior to independence to completely fight out the illiteracy, the dreaded devil continues to haunt its population even after independence. At the same time the threat across its borders does not cease to exist. In a way both the enemies thus perpetuated in a guise into the post independent era. The Government of Eritrea is now free to have its own planning and persuasion of the nobler objectives, which it held so dearly during its 30 years of prolonged battle. It did not lose a minute to set itself on the task. Though the census was not done since independence to determine the exact percentage of illiterate population both among males and females, the initial figures of 70% illiteracy among males and 80% illiteracy has now changed to 56-60% according to the surveys of some of its development partners and international agencies. It is a matter of pride and achievement, the serial droughts and 1998 war with Ethiopia over a boundary issue notwithstanding.

The Government of Eritrea has nonetheless embraced the Education For All (EFA)-a Fast Track initiative at Amsterdam in 2002 in accordance with Dakar resolution and its frame work of action. It has drawn out a well-defined

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